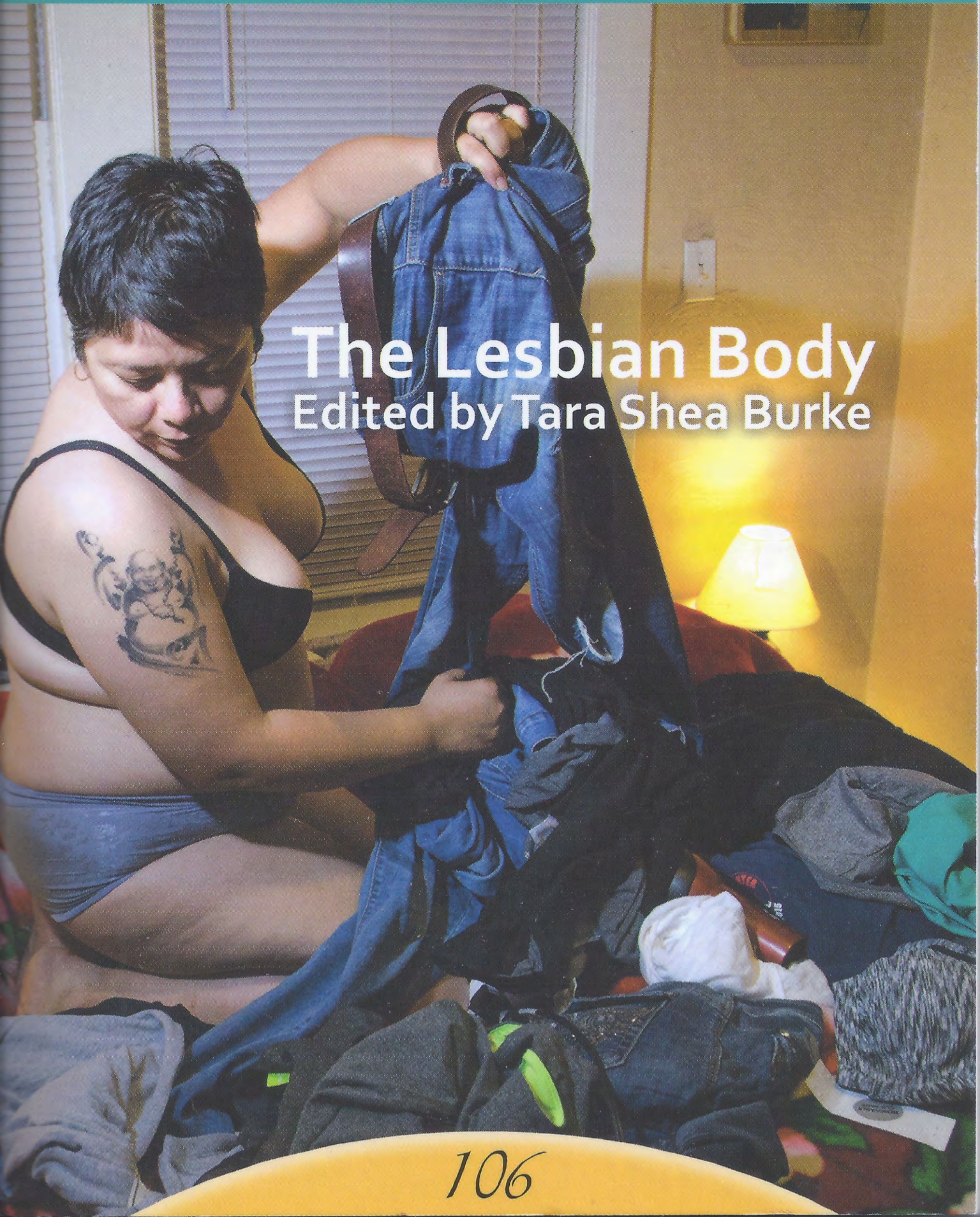


Sinister Wisdom

A Multicultural Lesbian Literary & Art Journal



The Lesbian Body

Edited by Tara Shea Burke

SUNDAY GIRL

Tanya Frank

In May of 1978, Blondie's *Sunday Girl* is number one on the hit parade for three weeks running. My best friend Donna and I have my transistor radio at full volume as we try to get our double step and turn just right, but my bedroom is cluttered, and my younger brother Sam comes in and puts us off by his mere presence.

We are about to turn fourteen and Sam is twelve, the difference feels huge, and we bribe him with two Polo Mints to leave us alone.

As the song fades, we slump onto my single bed, and it strikes me in that moment how much Donna looks like the pop star, whose real name is Debbie Harry. Instead of long unkempt peroxide locks, my friend's hair is naturally blonde and cut in a Purdey that she washes and blow-dries every morning before school. I think she is the prettiest girl on our council housing estate. Mum on the other hand thinks my friend has squinty eyes and a snub nose.

As we stretch out, Donna's feet brush the length of my legs and come to a halt with her toes upon mine. I'm giggly and breathless from dancing.

I inhale. My friend smells like Parma Violets from Martins The Newsagent. I think it's the fabric softener her mum adds to the washing. We can't afford such niceties in our house.

Lying shoulder-to-shoulder, hip-to-hip, Donna tells me, "Mark Johnson has just enlisted in the army." Two years older than us, he is her brother's best pal.

"I'm scared he might be sent to Northern Ireland, and that he won't come home again," she says.

I know why she's scared. The troubles in Northern Ireland are on the news a lot. There have been IRA bombings in London, too. The conflict goes back to 1609 when Scottish and English settlers, known as planters, were given land that had been robbed from the

natives in Ulster. I had to write an essay on the subject for school. I think it's enough already, but the Prime Minister still wants to send Mark and other boys like him over there.

I once asked my stepfather, Bert, "Why do so many of the boys from our council estate join the services?"

"Because it makes men out of them," he said, showing his teeth like a wild cat and hissing about how Sam should sign up when he was of age. "Spoiled rotten, bloody kid."

Bert had fought in the Korean War, and his khaki kit bag and smutty army songs proved it. "Never did me any harm," he told us.

Donna likes Mark. I think she might even love him a little bit. Instead of concern, I feel jealous. I want her feet to stay resting against mine. I want her to love me as much as she loves Mark, but we live in council flats in North East London, where girls aren't meant to love girls.

There is one couple that has defied the rules, Big Pam and Little Nicky. They are lesbians. Being that way inclined seems to make the two of them drink too much barley wine at The Greyhound Pub and end up fighting in public. Sometimes Little Nicky gives Big Pam a black eye, though given their respective sizes, you'd think it would be the other way around.

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"I think we should put something in front of your bedroom door, just in case," Donna says.

"In case of what?"

"In case Sam hears us and tries to come in," she says.

She gets out of bed, stoops into a squat in front of my chest of drawers, then like a Welsh rugby player, she heaves the furniture across the floor and barricades us from the rest of the household. Her calves are hard balls of muscle, and I am impressed.

Once back in my bed, she flicks her hair back the way she always does, and eases into a comfortable pose despite the limits of my

single bed. She lays her head on the edge of my pillow, drapes a leg over me, and reaches for my hand. We have never been this close. I think I have willed it to happen out of envy. I try to stay unfettered, fearful I might say the wrong thing and break the spell, but underneath my cool façade, I sweat into my school blouse.

The two of us gaze up at the low ceiling that was plastered by Waltham Forest Council. The lumps and bumps of the surface look like Porridge, yellowing from all the years that Mum smoked while reading us bedtime stories.

It is late now and we hear her snoring in the room next to mine. We laugh silently, our bodies convulsing, and our hands held tight. At some point we stop laughing, mostly because the act of Mum snoring wasn't especially funny in the first place. It must have been nerves that set us off.

My best friend shuts off my sidelight and draws me toward her. In the semi-darkness I can see that her eyes are closed and her freckled face is puckered. She kisses me, a deep snog, all tongue and teeth and saliva.

"You look like Blondie," I say, when I come up for air.

She opens her eyes and starts to sing, "I know a girl from a lonely street," it's too loud for my liking.

"Shush, Sam will hear us and try to come in." I tell her.

"I'll hide, just like this," she says. And with a bit of maneuvering, she disappears beneath the covers. I feel her hand on my breast, her fingertips gentle, exploratory, as if I am new territory. I reach down in a bid to pull her up, to say no, and send her home. I feel the bulk of her shoulders. She is strong and determined, as if there is nothing else that she wants in this instant, other than me. I am unable to resist. Donna's hair is in my hands, and the smell of her apple shampoo—or perhaps it is peach—I can't be sure, enters me like a sweet infusion.

What follows makes me start to lose myself. I spin like the Waltzers at Southend Pier. Donna's tongue is at my very center, the core of me that is alight with guilt and desire.

I let out a high-pitched squeal, a sound I don't recognize. I am embarrassed, and I try to cover my flushed face.

"Its my turn," Donna says. She unzips her jeans and wiggles out of them. I feel the protrusion of her pelvic bones, her slim waist. I do to her what she did to me, and feel her legs become taut like the hessian ropes that we climb in P.E. She presses herself into the mattress, then releases with a shudder, and becomes limp as if she's fainted.

"Are you okay?" I ask. She nods feebly.

"How did you learn all of that stuff? Have you done it before and not told me? Are we real lesbians now? Will people be able to tell? Will they stare at us like they do to Big Pam and Little Nicky?" I look at my new love. "Donna, Donna, did you hear a single word?"

Her breath is deep and even, her mouth set in a half smile and her hair wild and free. She is asleep. Even with her eyes closed, she is so pretty. I can't understand how Mum doesn't see it.

I awake as the morning light bounces at my window. The space beside me is empty, but the aroma of orchard fruit, Parma Violets and girl sex fills the air. On the whole the room seems to be untouched apart from a patch of ruffled carpet by the door.

I notice a piece of paper on my desk. Folded and marked private, it is written in red pen.

"Sorry I had to dash.

Was worried my mum would miss me.

I won't say a word about us.

Brownie's honour.

Dib, dib, dib, dob, dob, dob.

Don x"

Re-reading the letter, I smile. We always make our promises as if we are brownie guides, but then I realize there is something different at work in this letter. Donna has written dib, dib, dib, dob, dob, dob. That's what boy scouts say.

And she's signed her name Don.

I run to the bathroom, all at once scared that the world will see me differently.

I need to check for any immediate changes, growth of muscle tissue, especially around my calves, or facial and bodily hair. I look at myself in the mirror. I appear less feminine than usual. My hair is plastered to my head, and my jaw appears somewhat square. I am tempted to try a wolf-whistle. I have never been able to sound out more than a soft puff, while Donna can make a noise, shrill enough to reach from one end of the rounder's field to the other. I decide against such an activity, it is early and I don't want to attract unnecessary attention.

I bathe, and put on my pastel pink blouse and a short skirt. Both are extremely girlish and will help to counteract my new signs of masculinity. I find the high heels that Mum acquired for me at the jumble sale. I apply poppy red lipstick, coral eye shadow, and I part my hair and style it in two high bunches. Despite all the titivating, there remains something boyish and brave in my gaze.

I am speaking into the tape player, recording my voice to see if it has deepened since last night, when Sam puts his head round the door. "Got any more Polo Mints?"

He looks at my outfit and the thick make up that I have applied. "Ugh, you look funny," he says.

I seize the moment, haul him in and sit him on my bed.

"Sam, this is important," I say, as I reach up to the shelf and pull down an unopened packet of Polo Mints. His eyes light up.

"I want to know something. You have to swear on Mum's life that you won't lie."

"I swear on Mum's life."

"And make sure nothing's crossed," I say, looking at his chubby boy hands.

"What do you think of me? Who do you think I really am?" I ask. Sam looks at me, screwing up his whole face in puzzlement.

"Honestly?" he asks, keeping the Polo Mints in his range of vision.

"Yes, completely." I say.

"Well you're a bit fat, not a lot, just a bit and your teeth are yellow." He opens his hand, in anticipation of receiving a polo mint.

"What else?" I ask, holding back on the edible. "Does anything look different about me?"

"Yeah, you look...." I slip a Polo Mint out of the packet. Now is the time for a little encouragement.

"Pink," he says, sucking the Polo so ferociously that he dribbles.

"Think about how I act," I urge, trying a different tack.

"Well, you can be a bit mean and greedy," he says. I nod encouragingly.

"It's as if you don't even like me," he whines. "You just want to be with Donna all the time.

"Oh, I'm sorry Sam," I say, trying to sound sympathetic.

"Anyway what do you two do in the bedroom together?"

I can feel his eyes penetrating me, as if he can sense that I am perverse. He holds out his hand for another Polo Mint and sticks his tongue into the grooves of his teeth, checking for remnants of the sweet.

"Why are you all dressed up?" he asks, staring at my high-heeled shoes. "Aren't we going to watch T.V. together?" *The Fonz*, his favourite programme is about to start. When it finishes, my show of choice will start, *The Monkees*. It is quite a ritual, and if I happen to be feeling generous I will tickle Sam's feet, providing he's washed them.

Right on cue, Mum appears at my bedroom door. "Oh it's nice to see that you two are still getting on," she says. "Are you coming down? I'll make a nice big breakfast." Sam leaves immediately, losing me the opportunity to be furnished with more information. Mum is close on his heels and I hang back in my room.

"Donna just called for you," Mum shouts on her descent to the kitchen. "She wants to know if you can go and knock for her." Just hearing that Donna has called makes me feel triumphant, as if I've beat Sam at Animal Lotto.

"Are you not staying for breakfast?" Mum asks as I pull my cardigan off the coat hook. Sam perks up at this point and he and Mum both look at me expectantly.

"No," I mumble. "I'd better see what Donna wants."

"I'd better see what Donna wants," Sam parrots. And then he socks it to me.

"You two are lezzies."

Mum dries her hands on her apron, approaches him nonchalantly, delivers a smack round his kisser, and says, "Don't talk like that, it's filthy."

Filthy, I am filthy, even though I had a bath and used Mum's coal tar soap and medicated anti-dandruff shampoo.

Mum returns to the kitchen without saying a word. Sam's cheek is red and smarting and he rubs it fervently. I am pleased that he has come a cropper, but somehow my punishment feels worse, the ultimate insult, the prize that comes from keeping a filthy secret.

I am sweaty by the time I get to Donna's house. I knock gingerly on the door.

I have been visiting her in this flat since primary school, but always as her best friend, and never as her love, her girlfriend, or her shag. As she opens the door, I smell her, the scent of her clothes, her hair. We stand quietly looking at each other, registering the change in the status quo. I stare down at my shoes and turn my toes out as if preparing for a demi-plié.

"You look like Pinky," Donna says, breaking the ice. "Thanks," I say, although I'm not sure that it is a compliment. Does she mean Pinky the pig or Pinky from *Grease*? We sit down on her bed, a few inches apart, neither of us acknowledging what has happened just hours before. Donna plays "Sunday Girl." We don't try to dance this time. She hums to the chorus, and I am conscious of her deep voice like never before. She has forgotten to change the setting from auto to manual so the record plays over and over again, neither of us bothering to stop it. I pretend to study the inside

sleeve from the album cover. With furtive glances I spy my friend change the record to "Now That We've Found Love What Are We Gonna Do With It?"

"I have to go now," I say, adjusting my high heels firmly back onto my feet. Donna gets up and comes toward me. I move quickly, thinking that if she as much as kisses me, I might want to repeat the entire performance of what happened in my single bed. I make a hasty retreat toward the front door, slip out and run for the lift. She is right behind me and as the lift door is closing, she throws something in after me. It bounces on the hard floor and lands in the corner.

"I just want to give you something," she shouts from behind the closed door. "So you know it's real, what happened."

I pick up the object. It is not much bigger than a two pence piece, and looks as if it has been wrapped hurriedly in newspaper. I tear at the cellotape to reveal a pendant. It isn't just any old pendant, but one that she made in metalwork class.

I step out of the lift and turn the gift over in my right hand. The metal is cold and smooth to the touch. Donna's deft work, her dedication has breathed life into the object. I hold it at arm's length. It shines in vivid swirls of colour against the drab grey tower block, the concrete and the dust of the day. I smile and tuck the gift inside my bra, the chill of metal on my nipple.

I look up and count the floors until I reach Donna's flat. She is at the window, her blonde hair as perfect as ever. The glass pane can't be opened more than a couple of inches because the council put safety locks on every home from the second floor up. It was after Lynn Thomas fell from the living room, although the word fell is debatable because some say her boyfriend pushed her. I don't think about Lynn Thomas' body splayed on the concrete podium of Pine Court, not now, because my new girlfriend is poking two fingers out of the window, making the sign of the brownie guide pledge, and silently swearing me to secrecy.